

Resident: Suncook River flows over Epsom land

Man tells board gravel lot is town's

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When Pembroke selectmen and DES officials met last night to discuss updates on the Suncook River restoration project, resident Tom Baumeister had his own presentation prepared.

Armed with detailed maps on poster board, deed records and glossy photos of the rerouted river - which changed course through a gravel pit during the 2006 floods - Baumeister told Pembroke officials they'd been misled by the owners of the pit.

Baumeister, whose home has sustained significant damage from the floods, alleged that the town of Epsom owns a 5-acre plot in the heart of the gravel lot, or Cutter's Pit, and the state owns about 15 acres around it. He said Epsom has repeatedly denied it owns the land, but according to county records, that's not the case.

"They've been misleading us from day one," he said before the meeting yesterday. "The state doesn't want to put the river back on its original course. The land they own, and that the town of Epsom owns, is polluting the river, and it's illegal."

Furthermore, Baumeister said, when the owners of the gravel pit sold the remainder of surrounding land to an Epsom resident last year, it was with the understanding that the 5-acre parcel belonged to him - and he has been paying taxes on it since.

"If that's true, (Epsom officials) are in a bind," Baumeister said.

Residents of Pembroke, Allenstown and Epsom who live downstream from the gravel pit have seen a host of problems, stemming from the avulsion, such as heavy erosion along the river's banks, as well as heavy silt and debris in the water.

Studies funded by the state and town of Epsom found that putting the river back on its original course would be too costly and recommended a "restoration alternative" to stabilize the river's new path, said Steve Landry, Merrimack watershed supervisor for DES.

After a tri-town commission okayed the plans, the state presented a grant application to FEMA for \$3.8 million, which was denied about three months ago, said Richard Verville, the state's hazard mitigation officer, who worked with Landry on the proposal.

"Where we fell short was the benefit cost analysis portion," Verville said, adding that nationally FEMA had about \$100 million to dole out. This year, he said, it received more than \$700 million in requests. "When you're talking about a \$4 million project, you need to have substantial benefits . . . in order to justify it."

Landry said the grant being denied was "devastating news" based on the amount of time and effort put into it.

Landry and Verville said it would be best to break the project down into "doable pieces" and make it as shovel-ready as possible before reapplying for grants.

"We're moving forward with additional funding through the town of Epsom to do engineering work," Verville said. "If we go in with full design . . . we have a better shot."

Chairman Fred Kline proposed the three towns meet again to discuss options moving forward and suggested conducting alternative studies.

"I'd be glad to pursue whatever other options there are," Kline said after Baumeister's presentation. "We don't have a plan to push through tonight."

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